

Killer headed for Western State Hospital, not trial

Charges dropped after woman accused of stabbing her mother to death deemed mentally incompetent for trial

By SEAN ROBINSON

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In the next few days, Meshawn West, who stabbed her mother to death more than a year ago, will vanish from the public record.

She'll be transferred from a Pierce County Jail cell to a ward at Western State Hospital in Lakewood. If asked, state workers, bound by privacy restrictions, won't acknowledge her existence by name, or discuss her progress in treatment if she makes any. So far, she hasn't.

Thursday, Pierce County prosecutors were forced to dismiss first-degree murder charges against West, who was found incompetent to stand trial after three attempts to restore her mental status.

On Oct. 27, 2012, West, 40, repeatedly stabbed her mother, Joyce West, at the family home in Buckley. She later confessed her actions to investigators, saying she was being "spiritually raped" by her mother, who she claimed was practicing witchcraft.

"I had to stop this and put an end to it," West said at the time. When investigators tried to ask more questions, she reportedly began "speaking in tongues," court records say.

Since then, West has faced four psychological evaluations, most recently on Jan. 8. All reached the same conclusion: West suffers from chronic paranoid schizophrenia. She believes her family and friends and jail staff are practicing witchcraft on her, controlling her body without touching her.

"Ms. West still has no awareness that these psychotic experiences are symptoms of a mental illness," the evaluation states. "The defendant is still very psychotic."

While the charges against West were dismissed, prosecutors use a thorny phrase to describe her status: she's not "factually innocent." Rather, she's incompetent – unable to assist the attorneys trying to defend her.

She refused an insanity defense. She wanted to plead guilty, according to court records. She wouldn't say why.

The psychologist who examined her suspected it was because she planned to kill herself. At the time of the Jan. 8 evaluation, she hadn't spoken to her attorney for six months. State hospital records in the court file noted she'd hidden a large nail in her room. West also discussed plans to dispose of her body after death, records state.

In her latest evaluation, she refused to speak to an interviewer. She refused to attend classes aimed at restoring her competence to stand trial.

Her mind is out of joint – and hospital experts aren't sure why. They speculate her illness dates to the death of her infant child at some point in the past (records give no date).

She has no documented history of drug use or mental illness, at least locally. At the time of the stabbing, she'd just returned to her family's house in Buckley after a period of homeless wandering in Las Vegas.

While in Vegas, West wrote and filed a federal lawsuit against the Circus Circus casino; she claimed staff members kicked her out though she was doing nothing but watching television in the food court. The suit went nowhere; subsequent filings were sent to her address at Western State, where she spent most of her time after murder charges were filed.

The dismissal of those charges means West goes to the civil side of the state hospital, where, in theory, she can become eligible for release to the community within six months.

In practice, it might not work that way.

"We'll be keeping track of this one," said deputy prosecutor Steve Penner. "If she's found healthy enough to get a bus pass of her own, maybe she'll be healthy enough to sit through a trial."

A law passed last year by state legislators provides another potential trigger. Because West was charged with a violent crime, a court will review her potential release. In addition, a state-appointed panel of experts will examine any release recommendation from the state hospital. The panel's views will be submitted to the court.

Thursday's hearing, postponed three times in the past week, was brief. West entered the courtroom in a green jail smock reserved for inmates on suicide watch. No family members attended.

Superior Court Judge Frank Cuthbertson, after hearing statements from Penner and defense attorney Edward DeCosta, accepted the finding of incompetence with reservations, and ordered a future evaluation by a mental-health professional if West becomes eligible for release.

"I'm concerned that she's still actively psychotic, and has a long and chronic history – and still harbors delusional beliefs," Cuthbertson said.

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